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by By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

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“Who do you say that I am?” That’s the final, blunt question that Jesus puts to the disciples in today’s Gospel. No more hiding behind popular speculation; they had to answer for themselves. Worst of all, their answer could not be just an opinion. What they said now would profess their level of commitment. Their answer would explain just how far they would be willing to go with him.

How do we explain to people who Jesus is? We might tell children, “Jesus is the Son of God.” That is probably the best start we can make, but it is rather incomplete. It is akin to explaining who a relative is by saying, “Cousin Margaret is the daughter of Uncle Martin.” But so what? What is special about Uncle Martin or his daughter? The lights go on when someone explains that Uncle Martin sold the farm so he could send Margaret from Ireland to work and earn enough to save the rest of us from famine.

Now suppose you hear that Uncle Martin inherited a couple more farms and wants to adopt you. That sounds promising. But you would be wise to consider the idea that he might be willing to sell them and then send you to work for the rest of the family. How might that change the situation?

Why would you want to join Uncle Martin’s nuclear family? Marty has become known for a particular, if not peculiar, sort of behavior. He is ready to adopt anybody who is willing to participate fully in family life, but his value system is a real spoiler for anyone who has individual get-rich plans. According to Martin, wealth is fine, but he wants it for everybody, not just himself or even just his family. Being related to him has consequences.

Uncle Martin’s story reflects today’s Gospel challenge. Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be. “The Messiah,” said Peter. But what did that imply? Peter and the rest were faithful to Jesus according to their understanding of the Messiah. They were like someone that our landlord uncle offered to adopt. Only after getting excited about it did the adoptee seriously consider Martin’s plans for sharing the wealth. When Jesus explained the way he understood being Messiah, Peter was quick to try to straighten him out. Like the would-be nephew who tells Uncle Martin, “You’re a wealthy landowner! If you sell this farm, you’ll be nobody. (And me, too!)” Peter knows that if his Messiah is going to suffer, so will his followers.

Jesus answered Peter with the same words he used to call the sons of Zebedee: “Follow me” (translated now as, “Get behind me”). The implication was clear: If Peter and the rest believed that Jesus was the Messiah, then they had to trust Jesus to know how a Messiah should act. Jesus called disciples to introduce them to his way of living and to advance the venture he called the reign of God. Their story demonstrates that it takes a long time to grow into sharing Jesus’ priorities, but more important than their shortcomings is the fact that they stayed with him — and he with them.

Staying with Jesus, in spite of his warning that he and they would suffer, was what constituted that group as disciples. Having heard about the cost, they continued to listen to him.

What about today? How do we answer the question of who Jesus is? We can answer with our creed, but it is a pretty intellectual statement. The closest we get to an answer are statements: “For us ... and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. ... For our sake he was crucified.”

If we want to answer the question with heart and soul as well as mind, we need to encounter Christ, walk with him and talk with him. In his latest apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis asks, “Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord’s presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? (Gaudete et Exultate #151).”

As Catholics, our poor tradition of reading Scripture has left many unaware that the Church “has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #103). In light of that, Pope Francis reminds us that we can encounter Christ through prayerful reading of the Bible in which we allow God’s word “to enlighten and renew us” (Evangelii Gaudium #152-153).

When we spend time encountering Christ and allow him to enlighten and renew us, our way of living will be our final answer to who we say he is.

ISAIAH 50:5-9a

This selection from Isaiah offers one of Scripture’s best antidotes to what Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” (See *The Cost of Discipleship*, Chapter 1). Bonhoeffer understood cheap grace as a practice of Christianity that desires religion’s benefits without the cross. He called it the grace we bestow on ourselves in a religion that makes no demands and changes nothing, all the while expecting a heavenly reward simply for calling oneself a Christian. It is religion that sees baptism as an insurance policy rather than a job description.

Isaiah’s Songs of the Suffering Servant describe God’s faithful in a way that undercuts any self-interested motivation for religion. The servant begins saying that God has opened his ear and that he has submitted willingly to God’s word. One would expect that such obedience would bring blessing, and according to this servant it has, but not in the conventional sense of the word.

Unlike Jeremiah who railed about his mistreatment or Job who cursed the day he was born (Jeremiah 12; Job 3), the servant takes his suffering in stride, proclaiming “The Lord God is my help.” He so trusts in God that public opinion counts for nothing.

The early Christians used this and the other Servant Songs as the keys to interpreting Jesus and his mission from within their Jewish tradition. Popular messianic dreams longed for a victorious warrior/king. The Suffering Servant reveals what naked faith looks like. This is faith without any visible reward. Bonhoeffer might be explaining the servant’s paradoxical faith when he says, “If you don’t believe, take the first step all the same. ... Then you will find yourself in the situation where faith ... exists in the true sense of the word” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). The Suffering Servant, like Christ, knew God through the communion of obedience. That was the blessing he received and all that he sought.

PSALMS 114:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

This psalm gives thanks for the deliverance that Isaiah’s Suffering Servant had awaited in hope. Our refrain, “I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living,” echoes the servant’s faith. In the Hebrew mindset, to walk in God’s presence implied a wholehearted orientation of one’s life to God.

Whereas the servant concentrated on fulfilling God’s command and suffering in hope, this psalmist rejoices because of God’s deliverance. The central collective experience behind the psalm was God’s saving help through the events of the Exodus, nevertheless, anyone who has known God’s help in a time of trauma can resonate with the gratitude the psalmist expresses.

JAMES 2:14-18

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human

race and its liberation. (Justice in the World)

This quote comes from “Justice in the World,” the document issued in 1971 by the second Synod of Bishops following the Second Vatican Council. Originally, some bishops thought that statements like this were misleading, even potentially destructive of the church itself.

According to Jesuit Fr. Bill Ryan — one of the theological experts who attended the synod — some bishops contended that Christ’s body, the church, “is a perfect society and so cannot be essentially linked to earthly justice, which is never perfect.” They should try telling that to the James who penned today’s second reading!

In the end, the statement stood and 94 percent of the synod’s bishops approved the final document. But both in the preparation and in the aftermath, their statement that work for justice is essential to evangelization made waves in much the same way that the Letter of James probably did nearly 2,000 years earlier.

Today’s selection points out that there is no evading Christianity’s practical commitment to the poor. James asks if faith without works has saving value. He answers that it is just as valuable, as powerful and salvific as the words of someone who pronounces a beautiful blessing over a starving family but does nothing to find them food. Such a blessing is a mockery, the faith it claims is dead.

James meant to shock his community when he said, “Faith ... if it does not have works, is dead.” He was writing to people who found death repulsive and ritually contaminating. He might as well have said such faith was putrid, a repulsive masquerade of what it claimed to be.

Today the world has focused on sexual abuse scandals as putrefying church life. With all the deceit, cover-up and lack of concern for the welfare of victims, there is good reason for that. But one kind of clerical sin cannot be allowed to divert our attention from the demands faith makes on all of us. Today’s reading from James tells us that our liturgy is a mockery and our faith putrid if they don’t lead to action for justice.

We can rightly protest that global awareness makes nearly overwhelming demands on us. It is one thing to respond to the person within our reach, but what about the 23,800 that the U.N. says are forced to flee their homes each day, the chronically undernourished in sub-Saharan Africa or millions of undocumented children, women and men living in fear of deportation in the United States?

The fact that we can’t do everything is no pretext for doing nothing. At the very least, instead of echoing the hypocritical blessing, “Go in peace ... eat well,” we must skewer up the courage to pray, “Lord, show us how we who have so much can share and alleviate your hunger, your homelessness, your chronic insecurity.”

The worst thing about this sort of prayer is that God will answer it.

MARK 8:27-35

According to many scholars, this is the turning point in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had been teaching in Galilee, now he turns toward Jerusalem and begins to focus on teaching his closest disciples about what it means for him to be the Christ, God’s anointed one.

Last Sunday, we considered the need to have our ears opened in order to hear Christ’s message. This Sunday, the scene opens with Jesus asking the disciples what they have heard about him. They respond with people’s opinions.

Some say he’s John the Baptist. Both John and Jesus were popular preachers who gathered followers and were a threat to powerful civil and religious leaders. Yet, their messages were quite distinct. As Jesus admitted, John was known for fasting while he was famous for feasting. Herod’s fear that Jesus was John returned from the dead shows how much power John had over the popular imagination.

Elijah, the other popular guess, was the prophet who disappeared in a fiery chariot and was expected to return at the end of time (2 Kings 2:1-12). People who identified Jesus with Elijah were putting him in the category of the prophets. They were guessing and maybe even hoping that he might be the one to usher in the end of the world. Thinking of Jesus as Elijah indicated that they thought he was sent by God and faithful to the tradition of Israel.

It seems that there was popular talk and plenty of confusion about Jesus. The disciples' answer about what people said was the same answer Herod came up with after he had John put to death (Mark 6:14-16). People thought something unusual was happening among them and their varied explanations showed that they were paying attention and wondering, even hoping that something might come of it all. At the same time, their answers remained speculative. Nobody who said those things had to make any commitment; they could remain in the safe agnostic territory of "perhaps" and "we'll see."

At this point in Jesus' mission, idle speculation was worthless. After letting them talk about what they had heard, Jesus terminated the opinion poll and put them on the spot: "But you! You! Who do you say that I am?" That was the question of their lives. Why were they on the road with him? What were they seeking? How far were they willing to go?

Peter's answer was complete and Jesus would immediately expose it as completely mistaken. Like a deaf man whose speech was muddled Peter proclaimed, "You are the Christ." In reply, Jesus warned him not to talk about that to anyone.

Mark then says, "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer." That was hardly what the crowds and his disciples were expecting from a messiah. It was a contradiction in terms. Jesus might as well have offered them dry water or cooling fires. How could the hero-savior, the king of heaven, the ruler of the earth, suffer and die?

Rise after three days? Everyone knew that "three days" was code for "in God's good time." That meant we have no clue when it will happen, but we continue to hope.

This was a story none of them would have ever written, a play they might not have tried out for had they understood the plot. Unable to believe that Jesus meant what he was saying, Peter pulled him aside to try to talk some sense into him.

Jesus, standing with Peter and looking at the disciples, replied: "Tempter! I am the leader here. Follow me!" He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Jesus then addressed everyone around and put a clear choice before them. In effect he told them: "Either you try to save yourselves and end up with nothing but yourselves, or you give all that you are to this Gospel message and you will learn what salvation means."

John's parallel to this moment of decision comes when Jesus invites his followers to partake in his body and blood, thereby inviting them to participate in his total self-giving. In John's Gospel, Peter responds by saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life" (6:68). In Mark, Peter makes no reply; he and the others simply continue to walk with Jesus.

At this stage of the Gospel, Peter and the disciples are like the deaf man whose ears Jesus opened. Peter, speaking and acting on behalf of the disciples, communicated two important things. First, he professed faith in Jesus. Then, when Jesus told him his faith was distorted, he remained to learn more.

The journey to Jerusalem would be long and hard, and even when they reached the climax of the cross, the disciples hadn't comprehended Jesus' message. But they had the love and faithfulness to remain on the road with him, and that was all that was necessary.

Planning: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

The third Sunday of September is designated worldwide as Catechetical Sunday. It is a day to acknowledge and pray for those who serve as catechists for the parish and also a time to reflect on the breadth of the catechetical ministry itself. One aspect of that breadth is the role of parents in catechizing their children, so the materials from the national office for celebrating this day include an optional blessing of parents. If you ask catechists to come forward or to stand for their blessing, be sure to include catechists for Christian initiation, adult faith formation leaders and pre-school catechists along with the elementary and high school ministers. For the U.S., such materials and more information may be found at www.usccb.org (search for "Catechetical Sunday 2018").

The theme this year is “Enlisting Witnesses for Jesus Christ.” That theme reminds us that catechesis is not just about passing on doctrines and moral principles. It is intended to facilitate a deeper encounter with Jesus Christ and thus lead to a deeper living of our baptismal commitment.

Today’s readings support that theme. The first reading reminds us faith begins with listening to God’s word but often leads to suffering that drives us to rely on God. The epistle insists faith is dead if it does not lead to good works. In the Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that professing faith in him must be lived out and will lead to suffering for his followers as it will for him.

The reason that suffering so often accompanies faith is that following Jesus requires us to work for justice and care for the needy in society. This always arouses enmity from those who live by greed and power, and they are usually the ones who have the money and power to impose their will on others. So, like the prophet Isaiah in ancient times, today’s prophets are often abused and even killed by those whose power is threatened by the truth.

Catechists, too, may experience opposition at times if they teach the fullness of the Catholic tradition, which includes a large body of social teaching calling us to work for justice and peace. Preachers may also find resistance to some aspects of Catholic teaching that disturb the rich and powerful in society. But this kind of opposition is not limited to church ministers. Every Catholic is called to spread Catholic teaching beyond the church walls and to witness to the truth of Christ’s teaching in our world. That will bring opposition in many situations, so good catechesis must provide both the knowledge and the commitment to follow Christ when it is convenient and inconvenient.

The above paragraphs might give preachers some thoughts for the homily today, and they might also provide a number of concerns to shape the general intercessions and the choice of hymns.

Prayers: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Sue Robb

INTRODUCTION

Within our Scripture readings today are deep, and at times, controversial questions. Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” Then he asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” Like Peter, all Christian faiths today proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one. Despite our common proclamation, the second reading often serves as a proof text that separates Catholics from our Protestant brothers and sisters. Does faith alone save or does faith combined with corporal and spiritual works save us? These questions invite us to delve more deeply into the mysteries of God.

PENITENTIAL ACT

- Lord Jesus, you place in us a desire to know you more deeply: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are the perfect example of faith and good works: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you lead us into the ever-unfolding mystery of God’s love: Lord, have mercy.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider Trusting that God answers our questions and prayers, let us lift up the needs of our world.

Minister We pray for all Christians: for unity and loving acceptance of our theological differences with our Protestant brothers and sisters; for the ability to see and lovingly honor Christian and non-Christian beliefs that challenge our own; for an end to religious persecution in all parts of the world ... we pray,

- For peace for those who question their faith; for those who do not believe in God; for those who feel God has abandoned them ... we pray,

- For an increase in our spiritual and corporal works of mercy to ease the suffering of the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the lonely, the sick, the imprisoned and the dying ... we pray,
- For healing and peace for those sick in mind, body and spirit; for first responders, medical professionals and caregivers of the sick and dying, for compassion and patience in difficult times ... we pray,
- For all martyrs, known and unknown, who have given their lives for their faith; for those who have sacrificed their lives to save others ... we pray,
- For all the prayers and unanswered questions we hold in the silence of our hearts ... (pause) ... we pray,

Presider God of all people, let these prayers strengthen us to see others as you see them and to extend your love and mercy to all. This we ask this through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

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